





# THE CHURCH OF TO-DAY:

HER SELF-COMPLACENCY; HER INDOLENCE;  
HER LIBERALISM; HER WORLDLINESS.

## A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE MT. AUBURN BAPTIST CHURCH, CINCINNATI, SUNDAY MORNING, NOV. 25, 1865.

BY THE PASTOR,

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PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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CINCINNATI:

MOORE, WILSTACH & BALDWIN, PRINTERS.

1865.

#### EXPLANATORY NOTE.

The immediate occasion of the following sermon was a request, unanimously voted at a meeting unprecedentedly large of representatives from all the evangelical churches in Cincinnati, that in view of the appalling increase of public immorality and the accompanying comparative decline of numerical Christian strength, the pulpits of the city should, on the Sunday morning ensuing, present in some form the subject here discussed. It was, therefore, not written in a spasm of individual alarm, nor to establish a favorite crotchet of chronic despondency. It was not designed, as the thoughtful reader may see, for an exhaustive and ultimate prognosis of the Church's condition. It is simply a tentative of speculation adventured in a present most exigent interest of practical reform in morals and in Christian life. It is now printed, because some who heard it preached, believing, in the generous enthusiasm of the moment, that it might be farther useful in a more numerous audience of the press, requested the privilege of submitting it to that test of its real adaptedness to the Church's need. Already, be it gratefully recorded, the grace of the Holy Spirit is apparently falsifying its surmises by a most spring-like revival of religion in the congregation to whom it was originally preached. That same Spirit speed it on its mission of awakening the dispersion of believing hearts wherever it may come!

MOUNT AUBURN, *December 25, 1865.*

W. C. W.

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## S E R M O N .

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Can ye not discern the signs of the times?—*Matthew XVI, 3.*

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TO determine at a given epoch of history, what is, upon the whole, the strongest and most inclusive tendency of the current age, is confessedly ever among the highest efforts of the generalizing and forecasting mind. The movement is so vast and so various; it is disturbed by so many cross-currents and counter-currents; it intermits so often with alternations of ebb and flow; it occupies sometimes so much historic space to accomplish its cycle; it blends so imperceptibly with the movement which precedes and with that which follows; and withal you are yourself so inextricably involved in it, and form so indivisible a part of it,—that it requires no little temerity of speculation to hazard any confident conjecture of the direction in which your own age is drifting, and of the destination to which it tends.

This problem, proposed in the question of the text: *Can ye not discern the signs of the times?* admits of illustration from a striking astronomical analogy. You know it is a sublime presumption of science, conceived after centuries of patient perusal of the starry scroll of the heavens, that besides the earth's rotation upon its axis, shared by its continent, its ocean, and its air, and besides its revolution about the sun, shared by its lunar satellite,

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it has likewise a magnificent motion of translation through space, in common with the entire solar system and the sun itself, toward some point as yet hardly more than conjectured, in a certain region of the illimitable celestial sphere. It is difficult for us to realize vividly the earth's diurnal motion, though that is indirectly made sensible to us by the vicissitude of day and night. It is still more difficult to appreciate the earth's annual motion in its orbit, though that is illustrated by the quaternion of the seasons. Consider, then, what must be the supreme effort of the imagination to conceive of a movement which sweeps everything visible along with it, except the fixed stars themselves; and what must be the corresponding effort of the intellect to solve the arduous problem of its pathway and its goal! Like is the difficulty of arriving at any trustworthy conclusion as to that all-embracing historic drift on whose broad and billowy bosom you, with your whole generation, are embarked.

Astronomy, however, is emboldened to adventure her audacious guess, as to this secular motion of the planetary system, by the fact that there are fixed stars, or stars relatively fixed, from which her observations can be reckoned. Steadily pointing her glass toward these, she is able to frame her conjecture, notwithstanding the inequalities, the perturbations, the nutations, the compositions, with which her problem is perplexed. In like manner, Revelation has furnished us with at least a few fixed points of reference from which we may take our observations and form our conclusions in determining what is the true tendency of our times. I invite you to-day to recur with me to some of these established facts of revelation, with a view to bringing the age in which we live into collation and comparison with them. The text itself furnishes the phrase which shall entitle my theme. My theme is, *Signs of the Times*.

In treating this theme I purpose to photograph as well

as I may be able, some of the more conspicuous characteristic features of the present religious aspect of the world; and to set them in their order as they are successively represented by the side of those scriptures which interpret their symptomatic significance.

I. The first feature of the present religious aspect of the world, which I would attempt to fix for your contemplation is, its *self-complacency*.

The Church was never better satisfied with herself than she is now. Her aspiration was never less removed above the level of her attainment. She is pretty much what she wishes to be. She is rich, and numerous, and respectable, and well-educated, and powerful. She lives easily, resting under her own vine and fig-tree. There is no one to molest her or make her afraid. She is recognized wherever she goes—in society, in the markets, in halls of legislature, in the courts of kings, in the fellowships of literature, and even in the iron encounters of war. Where is the Church a stranger? Where does she fail to receive her bow? She has reasons for self-complacency, and she is self-complacent.

The simper of self-complacency on the face of the church is an elusive expression, not easy to seize and to fix. But it is nevertheless a very radiant expression, and it mantles and overspreads the whole cast of the features. The Church wears it and displays it, as the successful self-made man does that characteristic look of his own which to the observant eye reads off the entire history of a career. Indeed, the Church of to-day may be not inaptly compared to the man who from his youth has coped with adverse fortune, single-handed, and at last prevailed. He has now grown comfortably old and counts his silver hairs. He has retired from active business, and he lives mostly at his country seat. He drives to town, however, almost every day; for he loves to revive the recollection of the time when he too struggled, like those younger men.

He does not struggle any longer, but he patronizes those who do, and tells them the story of his career to encourage them. As for himself, he lives on his money, and not on his enterprise. He is public-spirited, however, and, with an easy smile, he puts his hand into his pocket, and makes his cash contribution to projects of general utility. He is liberal, and he shall have the reward of his liberality, which is praise. It would be unjust to defraud him. This hale old gentleman, self-made, fairly beyond the period of self-making, rubs his hands, beams on you,—on himself rather, and the smile you get is the second reflection—is wrapt from morning to morning, through waking and through sleeping in one bland, delicious reverie of self-complacency.

This is, feature for feature, the portrait of the Church of to-day. Who does not recognize it? Who will not vouch for its likeness to life? The Church has out-grown her heroic age. Her period of attempt and aggression is over. She is resting on her oars. She reckons up her achievements. She is Narcissus. She beholds her own image and is enamored of it. Oblivious with self-love, she is pining away. She listens with Sybaritic delight to the sermons that recount the struggles of her beginning, and point the contrast between her condition as it was then and her condition as it is now. She loves to remember that then not many wise, not many noble were called; and to be reminded that now she enrolls the mightiest of earthly names among the muster of her membership. She multiplies her own image under the form of innumerable societies. Then she holds anniversaries and jubilees, and sits her down to hearken while reports of presidents and of secretaries, and speeches of eloquent orators celebrate her prowess. She marvels herself each time afresh at the reach of her power, and thanks God that so much can be done with money—and on the whole with so little money.



Such is the result of one sitting of the Church for her portrait. She shall sit again under another point of view before we have done; but first let us bring the picture already obtained under the interpreting lens of revelation, and read its meaning. I find in the third chapter of the book of the Revelation a passage exactly in point. It reads as follows: *Thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing: and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.* This is addressed to the church in Laodicea, a church long since extinct. When the warning was addressed to her, she was in her era of self-complacency. Self-complacency therefore indicates a stage of decline.

I need not have resorted to scripture for proof, for experience and observation conspire to inculcate the same lesson. When a man begins to congratulate himself, he has already ceased to push his triumphs. The earnest spirit forgets the things which are behind. And Christianity is an earnest spirit. Sir Charles Napier, that stern hero of the Peninsular wars, was once told by a subordinate officer, "Sir, we have captured a standard." His general did not seem to hear him. The news was repeated, and then Sir Charles turned fiercely on the seeker after praise, and said, in a voice like thunder, "*Then take another!*" That is what our captain says to us, when we are enumerating our captured standards. The word is always, "Take another." Self-complacency is the mark of a degenerate church. And self-complacency is one of the pregnant signs of the times.

II. The second salient feature of the present religious aspect of the world which I shall sketch, is closely associated with the one already given. It consists in a very prevalent and noteworthy *withdrawal, on the part of Christians, from personal activity* in the work of Christ.

This is the age of organization, and of labor-saving machiens. The spirit of organization pervades every-

thing. It is rife in the world, and it has penetrated the church. We have come to believe in the omnipotence of methods. If anything is to be done, we must have a society for doing it. A constitution, in due form, with by-laws, a president, a secretary, a treasurer, a corps of agents, with circulars, reports, pamphlets, anniversaries, and the rest—you have all been brought up to acquaintance with the machinery, and you know the latest patents—you could, any one of you, be engineer yourself, at a moment's notice—these contrivances of men have assumed a consequence, in our eyes, that well nigh supercedes reliance on God. We pay decorous compliment to God, it is true, in customary phrases, as etiquette requires; but we tell each other, and we make ourselves believe, that *God always works by means*. This is our favorite formula for the exorcism of God from His kingdom. It is the baptized infidelity of modern enlightenment—the orthodox blasphemy of self-sufficiency—the Protestant apotheosis of method—the christian atheism of organization.

We think we can convert the world with money. We have declined, we have slidden sheer away, no one knows how far, from the simplicity, the individualism of the New Testament times. We have grown wiser than God. We have found out a way of effecting things on a grander scale than His. God's method was by contact of individual heart with individual heart. This was Christ's plan of life for Himself and for His followers. He would multiply individual radiant centres of vivifying power, such as He was Himself, and send them forth to enkindle the world of men, soul by soul. The apostles were thus themselves enkindled by contact with His life, and they became torch-bearers in their turn to others. The fire they set well nigh ran round the world. And we hear of no Missionary Societies, no Bible Societies, no Christian Commission, nothing but churches anywhere. But these

churches were fasces of fire-brands, each several brand burning unquenchably. Wherever one went, there sprang up a conflagration. It was a universal incendiarism of the Gospel. And the whole secret is laid bare in one line of Scripture, *They went everywhere preaching the Word.*

Worldly wisdom has made us ashamed of working in this antiquated way. It is too slow. It involves too much individual labor. It does not take advantage of organization. In short, it is a kind of retail business. And we have got beyond that. We have acquired capital and experience, and we can operate at wholesale. And so we follow the world, early and late, we are merchants, and mechanics, and lawyers, and physicians, and manufacturers—all which is right enough, and accordant with scriptural sanction; but then, whereas merchant and mechanic and lawyer and physician and manufacturer should be evangelist too, and fulfil a personal apostleship, instead of that, each plies his several craft, and at last all club together to employ a substitute, who is pastor, colporteur, missionary, as the case may be. This is division of labor—that famous invention of modern times, which puts to the blush the clumsy method of the Saviour and His apostles. Once in a while, a living soul is found in the church, whose piety can survive this petrifying insulation from the vitalizing contacts of personal work. Once in a while, a substitute is procured, who can maintain his consecration and his zeal, at the level of useful activity, amid the universal subsidence of the Christian spirit around him. But these are the exceptions. The rule is, that employers and employed, in this miserable traffic of substitution, go plumb down to the spiritual zero together.

The fact is, that it happens to the kingdom of God, as it happened to this republic during one of the conscriptions of the recent war. A draft was ordered, with a



clause allowing of commutation at a certain fixed sum of money. Those who preferred, for any reason, might respond by substitute. The state wanted an army of citizens. It got a regiment or two of substitutes, and a few millions of money. The kingdom of God orders a perpetual conscription of all its subjects, without distinction of age, sex, or condition. This kingdom is always at war, and it lives by conquest. Its need of recruits is therefore incessant, it is pressing and imperious. But, behold, the church has made the pregnant discovery that we can respond otherwise than personally. We can appear by substitute, or we can pay our commutation. The result is—just what we see, an army of mercenaries, some of them as faithful, God bless them! as the famous Swiss Guard, and a river, running fitfully, sometimes a freshet, often very low, an Ohio river—of revenue! Christ wants men, and we give Him money.

How is it, brethren, that we make this mistake? Where did we obtain the idea that we could satisfy the terms of the conscription, which run, *Let him that heareth say Come*, without responding in person? Has wealth acquired some magic power, that it did not possess when Christ came down HIMSELF to save us? He owned the wealth of the universe, and yet He came Himself. Nay, so little did He think of wealth, as a means of redemption, that He even laid all His wealth aside, when He came, and made Himself poor. He chose His apostles of the poor. Surely Christ—or we—have mistaken grievously. Alas, alas, my brethren!

Meanwhile, incredible as it ought to be, we are obliged to confess that it is true—our age is marked by the general withdrawal of Christians from personal activity in the work of Christ.

That nation does not long survive, whose citizens commit her safety to the keeping of mercenary soldiers. An age of Christianity, that supinely abandons the kingdom

of God to the zeal of hirelings, has abdicated the right to continued existence. Withdrawal from personal service in the kingdom of God, remember, is the second feature which I name as belonging to the current age of the church. It is a fit companion-feature for the first one mentioned, *self-complacency*. *Self-complacency* and *indolence*, simpering sisters in the family of effeminaey! How a new Pentecostal effusion of the Holy Ghost, poured out, as in the beginning, until it made a baptism and buried us all—how such a flood of fire would consume our vanity and our sloth! How we should rise regenerate from it, clad with zeal as with a cloak of flame! Then the now exultant host of Satan should behold the Church once more in her battle-array, *fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners!*

III. The third feature of the present religious aspect of the world, to which I draw your attention, as full of suggestive significance, is the tendency everywhere observable among Christians towards what I may term the *sentimentalism of unity*.

This tendency is so popular and so powerful, that it requires some courage to breast it. But in the name of truth, and in the strength of Christ, who is the Truth, I stand in mid-current and breast it. I frankly avow my belief that the sentiment of which I speak is morbid, and not healthy. I believe it to be a symptom, not of vigor, but of decay. I know the aspiration of my Lord for the union of His followers, and reverently I claim that I share it. I remember how he prayed as our High Priest that we all might be one. The union that He prayed for was the culmination and the climax of His desire in our behalf. It gathered into one all-inclusive request, the sum of petitions without number. It was, then, no light, no superficial, no transient, no illusory union that He craved. It was not the mechanic external coition of heterogeneous elements—precarious, capricious—the crea-



ture of compromise, the sportive offspring of a chance reciprocal gush of human good-fellowship. It was a high, a heavenly, a real, a mystic union of beings interfused by the mediation of the Holy Ghost, in the element of the Divine Nature itself. We were to be one with each other, by being all one in God. So Jesus expressly prays to His Father. *That they may be one in us*, are His words.

Evidently, therefore, the union of believers, which was the object of our Saviour's desire, is not a sentiment, but a fact—not a semblance, but, again, a fact. We are to realize it as a fact, not for ourselves, but for God. We need not even be conscious of it, being absorbed rather in the far transcending consciousness of union with God. Much less need we seek to symbolize our union outwardly to the world. If we really *are* one, the seeming may safely be trusted to God. Being, not seeming, is for us. And we shall *be* one with each other, exactly in degree as we are one in God. No other mutual union is possible, and no other were desirable. Struggle towards God, therefore, should be our work, and not struggle towards each other. The radii of a circle all diverge along their lengths, but they meet in the centre. And God is our centre. Upward, then, towards God, along the glittering paths that lead to Him! No cross-paths to get together before we get to Him! We shall only lose time and perhaps may lose our way. Upward, ever, one and all!—singing each,

Nearer, my God, to THEE!

The way to mutual union, therefore, is the common love of truth. Intense love of truth, by which I mean intense love of Christ, proving itself in His own chosen way by loyally keeping His commandments—this is the sign of a strenuous, an advancing, a victorious church. Christ's commandments are the symbols of our flag. We dare

not add, dare not tear out one. The different denominations of Christians are sometimes compared to the regiments which compose one army. They each are marshalled, they march and they fight, under their respective regimental standards. If any of our regimental organizations carry standards emblazoned with symbols not to be found among the commandments of Christ, it is for such to blot those symbols out. They have no business there. The true flag is one; it is inscribed with the commandments of Christ, only these and all these. We ought, each regiment of us, to assure ourselves as well as we can, that we carry the whole flag, and nothing but the flag. Then, if we are loyal and true, we shall fight for that, every yard of it, every foot of it, every inch of it, every shred of it! Not one thread, of warp or woof, that is not dyed red with precious blood. Our weapons will be tempered true, and sharpened shrewd, with heavenly love. The wounds we make will then heal themselves, and heal the wounded too. This is the loyal soldier's duty, and the loyal soldier's joy. A few campaigns of fighting together, in this spirit, would be sure to break down our denominational organizations without our effort; and we should find the one army of our Lord Jesus Christ reduced to its true, its scriptural organization, in which denominations should be unknown, and there should be no regiments but—churches.

But the present sentimental sigh, with which the Church is all agape, for outward unity, betokens anything rather than the vigor and the struggle of life. It is a feeling begotten, not of increasing love to God, but of slackening loyalty to truth. Liberalism is the disease of the Church. It is a dropsy that waters all her joints—it is a palsy that withers all her sinews.

I remember an instructive historic parallel. At the moment of supreme decrepitude with the Eastern Empire, holding her capital at Constantinople under the imminent

menace of the Turks, there was an unseasonable effort at compromise and union between the Greek and the Latin Church. It was the ineffectual endeavor of imbecility, the sick man straining after a false phantom of hope—it was a sigh for the consolation of mutual sympathy in weakness, where neither part had any strength to be reinforced or to share. Soldiers in actual warfare, campaigning side by side, feel their oneness in a common cause without talking about it. It is only after the war is over that they need revive their languid sentiment of oneness by recounting the ties which unite them, and by mutual declarations of love. *Self-complacency—indolence—liberalism*—these compose a triad of features which bespeak the decadence of a Christian age that possesses them.

IV. It would be impossible, within the limits of a single discourse of such length as the uneasy ears of this generation are willing to hear, to enumerate all the characteristics which give its physiognomy to the present age of the Church. But there is a fourth feature, belonging to its aspect, too important to be overlooked. Not even the recollection of last Sunday's allusion to it will excuse the omission of a glance at it now. I refer to the spirit of worldliness that has taken possession of the Church. In one word, then, *worldliness* is the fourth and last feature of the Church's present aspect, that I shall detain you to notice.

This feature, though apparently different, is in reality the same with the one last spoken of. *Liberalism* and *worldliness* are twin offshoots from a single root. That root is laxness of loyalty to Christ. The slack hold we have of earnest convictions allows us to lay them easily by, whether it is some sister denomination of Christians, or the world outside, with whom, for the sake of politeness and general good feeling, we would seem to be one. The maxim of our Saviour has its application here: *He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.* If



we can keep the less commandments of our Lord, against the temptation to display our liberality at His expense, we shall find it comparatively easy to be obedient in the greater commandments. On the other hand, if we yield a little, we shall find it hard not to yield more. A small leak will let out much water and—mark one thing—*leaks grow*. Accordingly, it is not strange to discover that the liberalistic church is also the worldly church.

Time was when it sped otherwise. Time was, for at least one happy moment of Christian history, in the uncorrupted virtue of the beginning, when, against the vain, the frivolous, the hurtful, the immoral amusements of the world—its circus, its theatre, its dance, its gladiatorial shows; as also against its extravagancies and indecencies of personal decoration, and its besotted devotion to gain—the little church, of not many wise, not many noble, preached and practised a brave protest. And the little one prevailed. The fashion of the world passed utterly away. But the world did not. The world lingered yet, and, quick to fence for life, took on another fashion. Now look around you and answer me these questions: Where is the Church that has the courage to stand straight up before the world, and not crook the pregnant hinges of the knees that thrift may follow fawning? Where is the Church that will not lift the yoke of the Christian profession so that the world can come under it without bending the neck? Where is the Church to enter which the convert is obliged to give up anything—that is tolerated in polite society? Where is the Church whose members do not, many of them at least, do everything by way of indulging themselves that would be deemed respectable by people of the world? Where is the Church that dares unflinchingly testify against horse-racing, theatre-going, opera-attending, dancing, Sunday evening Sacred Concerts, Sunday morning newspapers, wine-drinking, dressing like the citizens of Vanity Fair, and bedizening the

person with plaitings of the hair, and with bands and ornaments of gold and tinselry, like the inhabitants of the South Sea Islands?

The Church has tied her own hands, and she is helpless against all these things. The world has pressed in and swamped us. We are out-numbered and out-voted. The lobby controls the house. The modern fashion of the world, alas, confronts a silent church. No challenge, no protest, along the battle-line of her dumb-smitten hosts. Where is thy voice, oh church—where is thy voice for God? Speak! speak! and break this dreadful spell! *In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of her!*

With these four features of the Church's present aspect, depicted with such fidelity as I have been able—her *self-complacency*, her *indolence*, her *liberalism*, and her *worldliness*, I draw the day's discussion to its close.

What, you will ask, is my practical conclusion? Do I counsel despair? In time of extremity, when hope is loyalty, despair is treason—no! I counsel work—manful work. To your oars, brethren, every one, and pull each a lusty stroke. The current is strong—we are nearing the rapids—and the leap of Niagara is death. But the drift that hurries us on is not irresistible yet. There is a victory that overcometh the world. Christ with us, and good rowing shall save us after all. But we must *stop drifting*, and take to our oars in earnest. I seem now to feel the boat leap, as the choral stroke of all your arms together, brethren, sends it bounding upward against the mighty tide. You have been toying with your oars, hitherto. Only your little fingers have rested on them, while the strength of your girded loins has been given to the world. Come, brethren, now, young and old, both hands and bended backs; let us try for the rest of our lives, if that be not true, *greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world.*





